



DEPARTMENT OF POLICE MEDIA SERVICES DIVISION

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Warming Weather Brings Out Home Improvement Con Artists

The Montgomery County Police would like remind members of the community to be on the lookout for unlicensed home improvement contractors. As the weather warms up and Spring approaches, the activities of "woodchucks" increases. The group of individuals described as "woodchucks" are scam artists who generally target our elderly residents. These individuals will approach a victim and tell them that their trees need to be trimmed or removed. Then they will pressure the victim into paying thousands of dollars to have a few tree branches removed. The "woodchucks" then continue their scam by telling the victim that their roof is leaking and continue to scam the victim out of thousands of dollars more.

Recently, there have been several high profile cases involving fraudulent contractors who have conned Montgomery County residents out of hundreds of thousands of dollars. In one case, the victim lost \$90,000 dollars, in another case, the victim lost \$82,500 dollars, and in yet another case, the victim was lucky and only lost \$3,000 dollars.

The unlicensed home improvement contractors will drive through neighborhoods looking for elderly residents or cars with handicapped license plates on them. They will then approach the house and try to solicit business. Several clues that a fraudulent contractor is present include saying things like "we have material left over from another job in the area and can give you a real good price." When a contractor tells the victim that they must pay half or all of the cost of the job up front, this is also a clue that they are fraudulent. Maryland state law states that a contractor may not charge more that 33% of the total cost of the job as a down payment.

Two prevalent scams that occur in Montgomery County are the "driveway re-sealing" scams and the "roof leak" scam. In these scams, the fraudulent contractor approaches the homeowner and tells them that their driveway needs to be re-sealed and then quote an exorbitant price. The same applies to the roof leak scam. The fraudulent contractor will tell the victim that their roof is leaking and that they need emergency repairs. Again, when the quoted price is \$25,000 - \$30,000 dollars to repair a minor roof leak, this is a clear indication that a fraudulent contractor is present.

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To prevent home improvement scams:

- Contact the Maryland Home Improvement Commission at 410-230-6309 or online at www.dllr.state.md.us to see if the contractor has a "Home Improvement Commission License" issued by the State Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation.
- A contractor that is officially licensed by the State will have written proof of insurance available for review by the consumer.
- Diligently research and carefully plan the home improvement project.
- Choose a contractor carefully. Contact the Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection at 240-777-3636 or online www.montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer to find out if there have been any complaints about the contractor.
- Check with the Better Business Bureau to see whether the contractor has any complaints on file at 202-393-8000 or online at www.dc.bbb.org
- Ask a lot of questions of the contractor. Ask that they show proof of their Maryland State Home Improvement Commission and proof of insurance. Legitimately licensed contractors will gladly provide written proof of their official credentials.
- Make sure the contractor provides a Home Improvement Contract and both the consumer and the contractor sign it before work begins or money is paid. Remember too that the maximum amount of money that the contractor can request as a down payment is 33% of the total cost of the job.
- If at any time, a solicitor makes a resident feel uncomfortable with their attempt to perform work at their home, the resident has every right to shut their door and call the police via 911. The police department will certainly and gladly respond to check out the solicitor. The resident can also be very helpful to the responding officers by getting a good description of the individual and the type of vehicle that they are driving; including color, make, model, and especially the license plate number.
- For those residents that have elderly parents, other elderly family members, or friends, check on them often to ensure that they are not being swindled by the fraudulent contractors. Often times, elderly victims will not tell anyone that they have been victimized because they are embarrassed or they cannot remember all of the details.

For more information regarding home improvement jobs and hiring a contractor, please contact the Office of Consumer Protection at 240-777-3636 or go to the Montgomery County Government Website, www.montgomerycountymd.gov and click on "Departments," then click on "Consumer Protection."

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